



Pop science contributors harm with commentary

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Science outreach figures are practically heroes in a time when the president has given the finger to the Paris Agreement and the Flat Earth Society is gaining traction on social media. However, these icons of logic are not experts in every conceivable area, and I caution against taking their word as gospel, even if they're these people:

Bill Nye is a beloved former host of a children's show which clearly and simply explained scientific concepts, and was generally a reprieve from the daily minutiae of middle school. But, despite what we were all made to believe, Nye is not a guy who encompasses all of science, and if he is asked about anything other than mechanical engineering or charisma, his input is not something that should be presented and believed as expert opinion (even if what he's saying is correct).

Now, it's fine for a celebrity to express their views to their audience; the difference here is that Nye uses his fame to assume an authoritative voice which has more weight than it should.

Leonardo DiCaprio is also a huge advocate for action regarding climate change, but I've never seen a news source reach out to him for a meteorological explanation; in contrast, Nye accepts such invitations all the time, leading to instances like an MSNBC interview where he gave incorrect information about a blizzard (addressed by Washington Post weather editor Jason Samenow), and another with Sirius XM where he linked recent hurricanes to climate change and again got some of his facts wrong (addressed by Cato Institute research meteorologist Ryan Maue).

On an equally politically charged topic, in 2015 Nye released a video blasting the pro-life cause, and while I love his general sentiment, he sounds like he rolled out of bed and into a ketamine hangover, and so does his argument (the science of which has been nitpicked in countless news articles and videos, notably by Robert P. George, a former member of George W. Bush's bioethics council).

I'm as pro-choice as it gets, and it's heartbreaking to read pro-life activists justify their views by virtue of the fact that Nye's argument isn't flawless. His heart is undoubtedly in the right place, but there is absolutely a danger in getting only part of the facts correct in this asinine era of "fake news."

At its core, Bill Nye's problem is arrogance, and a much worse offender is Neil deGrasse Tyson, who also cannot be contained to his area of study.

Last year he tweeted doubts that sex has ever been painful for a species, and gave backchat to those who tried to refute his claims, some of whom are actual biologists. Now that I've developed an attitude, his tweets validating the Game of Thrones dragons this month were also annoying, as if fantasy creatures have provable biology. Viserion might weigh as much as a nickel, he's magic, dismount your high horse, Tyson.

More egregiously, Tyson is famously condescending to the entire field of philosophy. In a 2014 Nerdist podcast, one of the hosts mentioned that he majored in philosophy, to which Tyson replied, "That can really mess you up, you realize that, right?" and proceeded to reduce the field to merely a hindrance to science, as if modern science wasn't born of philosophers asking epistemological questions, and as if that wasn't an insufferable thing to do. And in 2016 he had the gall to moderate a debate concerning whether or not we're living in a computer simulation, despite this being the type of silly question that won't advance humanity that Tyson seems to think comprises all of philosophy (a ridiculous stance from someone who feels the need to comment on dragon physics).

This hypothesis is a philosophical concept, not one of probability, and yet he still came up 50 percent as the likelihood that we're in the Matrix (his "proof" was that since we're smarter than monkeys, something else exists that is that much smarter than us who have already created the technology needed to create perfect simulated reality. If you think that's a leap, congratulations, you should get a television show).

I will never accomplish half of what Malcolm Gladwell has, but, boy, do I have grievances: Gladwell is a bestselling author of books that attempt to reconcile the findings of sociological and psychological studies with our everyday life, and for whom I feel nothing less than roiling hate.

In a twee interview with The Telegraph (which described him as "bendy looking"), Gladwell said, "I wanted to mine current academic research for insights, theories, direction, inspiration or whatever. That's what I did..." And that is exactly the truth.

Gladwell is a journalist, not a sociologist, or even a statistician. He piggybacks on the work of real experts, coming up with hunches based on their data and presenting his conjectures as facts (and that's the best-case scenario: some of the studies that he cites used tiny sample sizes, or were unreplicable).

Then he cherry-picks anecdotal evidence to suit his obviously non-peer reviewed claims — his entire career can be dismissed with the phrase "correlation does not imply causation."

It's easy to get sucked into his writing because it has the same satisfying "if this, then this" effect as pop music on the brain, but with even less payoff. The majority of his fans remind me of people who read Rhonda Byrne's exploitative flapdoodle and begin spouting off about quantum mechanics.

At least Nye and Tyson have inspired many fans to pursue a STEM career; Gladwell leaves his with dinner party non sequiturs.